

Message Text

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64

ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SAB-01 OMB-01 AID-05 CIAE-00 DODE-00

PM-03 H-01 INR-07 L-02 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 RSC-01

PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 /062 W

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P R 062143Z JAN 75

FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2694

INFO PANCANAL

USSOUTHCOM

C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 0069

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINT, PN

SUBJECT: HIGH-LEVEL GOP CHANGES-ESCOBAR AND ROYO

SUMMARY: ACCORDING TO THE JANUARY 6 EDITION OF CRITICA, THE RECTOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PANAMA, ROMULO ESCOBAR, HAS BEEN NAMED TO THE GOP'S TREATY "NEGOTIATING COMMISSION" AND REPLACED AS RECTOR BY MINISTER OF EDUCATION ROYO. THE MOVE, WHICH THE EMBASSY HAS INFORMALLY CONFIRMED, APPEARS TO BE A SHREWD ONE. ASIDE FROM ESCOBAR'S DEPARTURE FROM THE UNIVERSITY--LONG RUMORED TO BE UNDER CONSIDERATION BY TORRIJOS--THE RECTOR'S PUBLIC "APPOINTMENT" TO THE GOVERNMENT'S NEGOTIATING TEAM WILL EFFECTIVELY IDENTIFY HIM WITH THE TREATY AND, LOOKING AHEAD, COMMIT HIM TO ITS DEFENSE. END SUMMARY.

1. ACCORDING TO THE JANUARY 6 EDITION OF CRITICA--IN AN EXCLUSIVE HEADLINE STORY ATTRIBUTED TO "EXTRA-OFFICIAL" SOURCES--UNIVERSITY OF PANAMA RECTOR ROMULO ESCOBAR BETHANCOURT HAS BEEN NAMED TO THE GOP'S "NEGOTIATING COMMISSION" AND MINISTER OF EDUCATION ARISTIDES ROYO DESIGNATED TO REPLACE ESCOBAR AS UNIVERISTY RECTOR. THE CRITICA ACCOUNT, WHICH DID NOT SPECULATE ON THE REASONS FOR THE CHANGES, NOTED THAT THE "COMMISSION" IS ENGAGED IN THE FINAL STAGE OF PREPARING A DRAFT TREATY WITH THE U.S. AND STATED THAT ESCOBAR WOULD
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RETURN TO THE RECTORSHIP WHEN HIS DUTIES ON THE COMMISSION

ARE CONCLUDED.

2. A KNOWLEDGEABLE AND USUALLY RELIABLE EMBASSY SOURCE AT THE UNIVERSITY CONFIRMED THAT THE CHANGE WAS OFFICIAL AND THAT ROYO WOULD ASSUME THE POSITION OF RECTOR DURING THE COURSE OF THE WEEK. IT WAS NOT YET CLEAR WHETHER ROYO WOULD RELINQUISH HIS PORTFOLIO ON AN INTERIM OR PERMANENT BASIS, ALTHOUGH SOURCE WAS INCLINED TO BELIEVE THAT NEITHER ESCOBAR OR ROYO WOULD RETURN TO THEIR FORMER POSITIONS.

3. IN OTHER GOVERNMENT PERSONNEL CHANGES REPORTED BY CRITICA, ALBERTO PEREZ HERRERA, COORDINATOR OF THE STATE-OWNED LA VICTORIA SUGAR MILL, WILL MOVE TO MANAGER OF CITRICOS DE CHIRIQUI. PEREZ HAS BEEN REPLACED BY RAUL GARCIA DE PAREDOS, PRESENTLY GOVERNOR OF VERAGUAS PROVINCE. HERNAN VASQUEZ REPORTEDLY HAS BEEN NAMED GOVERNOR OF VERAGUAS IN PLACE OF GARCIA DE PAREDES. COMMENTING ON THE PEREZ MOVE, CRITICA REPORTED THAT AN UNIDENTIFIED GROUP IN VERAGUAS IS ATTEMPTING TO FORCE THE GOP TO RETAIN PEREZ AT LA VICTORIA, THREATENING A STRIKE TO DO SO.

4. COMMENT: ESCOBAR, OF COURSE, HAS BEEN SERVING ON THE GOP'S TREATY NEGOTIATING SUPPORT GROUP FOR SOME TIME BUT THIS IS THE FIRST PUBLIC ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF HIS MEMBERSHIP OR INDEED THAT THE GROUP EXISTS. FOR MONTHS EMBASSY CONTACTS HAVE BEEN SAYING THAT TORRIJOS, PRESIDENT LAKAS AND OTHERS WITHIN THE GOP CIRCLE HAVE WANTED TO EASE ESCOBAR OUT OF THE UNIVERSITY IN ORDER TO MAKE SOME BADLY NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS IN ITS ADMINISTRATION AND IN ITS "OPEN-DOOR" ADMISSIONS POLICY WHICH HAD BROUGHT ACADEMIC STANDARDS PERILOUSLY LOW. THE PUBLIC LINKAGE OF ESCOBAR'S DEPARTURE FROM THE UNIVERSITY WITH HIS DUTIES ON THE CANAL TREATY NEGOTIATING COMMISSION APPEARS TO BE A GRACEFUL AND FACE-SAVING WAY FOR TORRIJOS TO EASE HIS OLD FRIEND OUT. ALSO, THERE IS A CERTAIN LOGIC AND SHREWDNESS IN ESCOBAR'S PUBLIC "APPOINTMENT" TO THE GOP'S NEGOTIATING TEAM. AN ACKNOWLEDGED NATIONALIST AND FREQUENT CRITIC OF THE US, ESCOBAR WILL HENCEFORTH BE PUBLICALLY IDENTIFIED WITH THE TREATY AND COMMITTED TO ITS DEFENSE. IN THIS REGARD, NOW THAT THE EXISTENCE OF A "NEGOTIATIONG COMMISSION" HAS BEEN CONFIDENTIAL

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REVEALED, WE MAY WELL SEE MORE OF ITS MEMBERS PUBLICALLY IDENTIFIED.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PRESS RELEASES, PERSONNEL APPOINTMENTS, NEGOTIATIONS, UNIVERSITIES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 06 JAN 1975
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: GolinoFR
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1975PANAMA00069
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D750005-0644
From: PANAMA
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1975/newtext/t19750176/aaaacol.ktel
Line Count: 110
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION ARA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: GolinoFR
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 11 SEP 2003
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <11 SEP 2003 by SmithRJ>; APPROVED <03 NOV 2003 by GolinoFR>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
05 JUL 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: JECT: HIGH-LEVEL GOP CHANGES-ESCOBAR AND ROYO SUMMARY: ACCORDING TO THE JANUARY 6 EDITION OF CRITICA, THE
TAGS: PFOR, PINT, SEDU, PN, PQ, (ESCOBAR BETANCOURT, ROMULO), (ROYO, ARISTIDES), (PEREZ HERRERA, ALBERTO)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006